

KEEPING AFGHANISTAN IN AFGHANISTAN

As a possible peace and removal of American troops appears imminent, how do Afghanistan's Turkic neighbors view the regional security situation?

By Bruce Pannier

From the early days of Afghanistan's independence in late 1991, the five Central Asian states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union were acutely aware of its instability. Refugees, weapons, narcotics, and eventually militants crossed Central Asia's more than 2,000-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were no longer Soviet republics and no longer had the security guarantees which the suddenly defunct state had provided for decades. Though the governments of the five countries were united in their concerns about spillover from Afghanistan, they were divided over how to respond. Outside help from almost any quarter was welcome, but the only interested party was Russia, still tied to the region from Tsarist times.

The military campaign launched by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 provided Central Asia with a respite. The Central Asian governments cooperated with the U.S.-led campaign, allowing international coalition forces to use airbases and land routes into Afghanistan. Uzbekistan granted the United States permission to use the airbase at Khanabad, a base that Soviet troops had used for their Afghan campaign. In April 2002, Uzbek President Islam Karimov told his country's parliament, "the decisive role in removing the threat on Uzbekistan's southern border was played by the U.S."

In January 2014, with international coalition forces implementing the announced "drawdown" of troops in Afghanistan, Karimov addressed the country on the Day of the Defenders of the Homeland, telling Uzbekistan's people, "The withdrawal of the ISAF peacekeeping forces from Afghanistan could be a serious test for all countries in Central Asia". Karimov called on citizens "to be on high alert," and to be "ready to repel aggressive acts against our country". Leaders in the other Central Asian countries were giving their people the same message.



The rapid deterioration that occurred in Iraq shortly after the departure of U.S.-led forces there led Western policymakers to suspend the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Today, however, the current U.S. administration is signaling that the time to withdraw foreign forces is coming soon. The situation in northern Afghanistan now is more unstable than it has been at any time since 2001. The fear of Afghan spillover is again a priority for governments in Ashgabat, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), and Tashkent. They have come full circle, again trying to act as peacemakers for warring Afghan factions, while simultaneously seeking allies to prop up their security if peace efforts fail. This time, however, their list of potential allies is longer than it was two decades ago.

△ Chinese excavators install equipment and machines near a copper mine in Mes Aynak, a town in the Logar province of Afghanistan, Feb. 14, 2015. *Omar Sobhani/Reuters*

Nearby states such as Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran, as well as those farther afield in the West, see the potential threat Afghanistan represents. Many worry that the nation's stability may crumble and Afghanistan may become a safe haven for international terrorist organizations, as it was in the 1990s when groups like Al-Qaeda found shelter there. Moreover, many countries see that by helping the Central Asian states contend with Afghanistan's uncertain future, they can also expand their influence into the region.

Russia's Central Asian Role

Russia remains the dominant military power in Central Asia. The Russian military entered the territory of what is now Kazakhstan in the first half of the eighteenth century, and by the end of the nineteenth century, Russian rule extended south to what is now Central Asia's border with Afghanistan. After the Soviet Union fell apart, Russia maintained control over the 201st Division, a unit stationed in Tajikistan since shortly after the end of World War II.

Civil war broke out in Tajikistan in the spring of 1992, less than a year after it gained its independence. Tajikistan had three different leaders before the end of November that year. The government was losing control over huge areas in the southern and eastern regions of the country to its opponent, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), and it was beyond the ability of officials in Dushanbe to keep watch on the border with Afghanistan. The UTO—an interesting coalition of Islamist, democratic, and regional groups—was able to exploit this and find a safe haven in Afghanistan, where they could also procure weapons before returning to Tajikistan.

To stem this instability, Russia left its border guards along the more than 1,200-kilometer Tajik-Afghan frontier that follows the winding Pyanj River through remotely inhabited high mountain areas. In the west, the Pyanj becomes the Amu-Darya as it flows through the relatively flatter lands of southwestern Tajikistan. The Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek governments feared that the Tajik and Afghan civil wars were merging and would eventually spread further into Central Asia. In 1993, the three neighboring countries agreed to contribute troops to a peacekeeping force that joined Russian troops along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, freeing up Tajik government forces to participate in fighting in Tajikistan's interior. It was the only time Central Asian troops served together in a conflict zone.

The warring factions in Tajikistan signed a peace accord on June 27, 1997, and shortly after Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan withdrew their units, but not Russia. Russian border guards stayed along the Afghan frontier until 2005. The 201st Division is still stationed there. Both the Russian and Tajik governments agree that the Russian division helps guarantee Tajikistan's security from potential threats emanating from Afghanistan. An agreement signed by Moscow and Dushanbe in 2012 provides for the 201st Division to stay in Tajikistan until at least 2042.

By 2003, the U.S.-led coalition was using air bases in every Central Asian country to support operations in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan only allowed coalition aircraft rights for refueling and emergency landings, but airfields in Khanabad and Termez in Uzbekistan, the Dushanbe airport in Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan's Manas airport outside Bishkek hosted coalition bases.

Russia supported U.S. efforts in Afghanistan after the 2001 attacks and signaled to the Central Asian governments that Moscow had no objections to a limited and temporary presence of NATO troops and military planes on Central Asian territory. But by 2003, Russian President Vladimir Putin was encouraging Kyrgyzstan to allow the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an alliance of former-Soviet states, to use the Soviet-era airbase at Kant, some forty kilometers from the base American forces were using at Manas. The Russian-led CSTO claims to be under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but only Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan are members. The base at Kant appears to be, in fact, not only under Russian control but also manned almost entirely by Russian forces.

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Kant and the 201st Division in Tajikistan are Russia's footholds in Central Asia. In recent years, the Russian military has strengthened both forces in anticipation of the drastic reduction of foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Russia has also been working to persuade Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the two other Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan, to cooperate more closely on regional security, with some Russian officials referring to Central Asia's border with Afghanistan as the "CIS border" with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has joined and withdrawn from the CSTO twice and is currently not a member. Karimov was always suspicious of Russian intentions in Central Asia and only turned to Moscow for help when he was in dire need. Karimov died in 2016 and his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has already proven amenable to better ties with Moscow, especially military cooperation.

Turkmenistan: An Uneasy Neighbor

Turkmenistan proclaimed itself a neutral nation not long after its independence, a status the United Nations confirmed in December 1995. Turkmenistan's government has used this status to avoid participation in any military alliances. The Turkmen government's policy toward Afghanistan has always been that Ashgabat would do business with whoever was in power, especially since it wanted to export its natural gas and electricity to, and through, Afghanistan. The Turkmen government did not officially recognize the Taliban when it ruled most of Afghanistan, but it did allow the Taliban to open a representative office in Ashgabat, hoping it could lead to construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, a project that represents billions of dollars in revenue for Turkmen state coffers.

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However, nowhere has the recent deterioration in security in northern Afghanistan been as pronounced as the areas along the approximately 750-kilometer border with Turkmenistan. Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan has always been restive since its independence; shoot-outs between border guards and narcotics smugglers happen regularly. But not along Turkmenistan's border with Afghanistan, which was relatively calm until February 2014 when three Turkmen border guards were killed by armed men crossing from Afghanistan. In May 2014, another group of armed men crossed at a different part of the border, killed three Turkmen soldiers, and took their weapons back to Afghanistan. There have been other reports of casualties among Turkmen forces along the Afghan border, but through it all, Turkmen officials have denied that there is any problem along that frontier, while portraying unprecedented snap military exercises, call-ups of reserves, and sudden sharp increases in purchases of military equipment as nothing out of the ordinary.

Turkmenistan's publicly nonchalant attitude toward its Afghan frontier has exasperated those trying to shore up security along the Central Asia–Afghan border, foremost among them Russia, which has several million Central Asian migrant laborers working on its territory. In January 2016, Aleksandr Sternik, the director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Third CIS Department, said Russia stood ready to help Turkmenistan ensure border security. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited at the end of that month and repeated the offer. When Ashgabat shrugged off the proposals as unnecessary, the Kremlin finally sent Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu in June 2016. According to Russian media, it was the first visit by a Russian defense minister to Turkmenistan since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Turkmen media reported on the “equal, strategic” partnership Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov and Defense Minister Yaylym Berdiyev discussed with Shoygu, omitting any mention of Afghanistan. Russian media reported that Turkmenistan had agreed to greater Russian cooperation in strengthening Turkmenistan's military capabilities, including weapons sales and training.

Russia, the traditional power in Central Asia, has clearly signaled it is prepared to step up its role there again as the United States and its allies leave the matter of security in Afghanistan to Afghan government forces. But there are other interested parties.

China Positions Itself

China has rapidly expanded its influence in Central Asia since the start of the

twenty-first century, and Beijing now also has security concerns involving Afghanistan. China had no presence in Central Asia when the Soviet Union broke up, but when it established the Shanghai Five economic bloc in 1996, this became a vehicle to engage in Central Asia. The Shanghai Five included China and the newly independent states that had once been the Soviet republics on its border—Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The initial purpose for the group was the reduction of military forces along the CIS–Chinese frontier. This proved so successful that the group decided to use the organization to boost economic and security cooperation. In 2001, the group added Uzbekistan and became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, (SCO); Pakistan and India joined in 2015. Now China is a leading investor in every one of the Central Asian states, particularly in their energy and mining sectors, and Beijing is the leading creditor to some of them. China has a multibillion-dollar stake in preserving the status quo in Central Asia since oil, natural gas, and uranium from Central Asia help fuel its economic progress.

More recently, Beijing has developed concerns about small groups of Chinese nationals, the Uyghurs, who have been found in the ranks of Islamist militants in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The Uyghurs inhabit the lands of what is now western China, once referred to as East Turkestan and currently called Xinjiang by Beijing. The Uyghurs became Muslims about one thousand years ago, but their often-turbulent relationship with China goes back hundreds of years before that. The Uyghurs are ethnically and culturally related to Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Turkmen.

In early 2017, a group of Uyghurs released a video filmed at a training camp somewhere in the Middle East; one Uyghur made threats against China in the video. It was not the first time Uyghurs who joined militant groups in the Middle East posted a video threatening China, but this one struck a chord in Beijing. In March 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping vowed to build a “great wall of iron” to defend Xinjiang. The crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang that had been slowly proceeding for years intensified so that by the start of 2019, bans prohibited Uyghurs from practicing almost any of the rituals required by Islam, including observance of Ramadan, and according to some international rights groups, one million or more Uyghurs (along with some ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in Xinjiang) have been sent to re-education camps where they are immersed in communist doctrine and constantly reminded of their duties as citizens of the People’s Republic of China.

There were Uyghurs in the ranks of the Taliban when the U.S.-led operation started in Afghanistan, but judging from reports about the Afghan conflict, their numbers are considered to be small. Yet, since 2001, every year Afghan government forces have reported capturing or killing handfuls of Uyghurs in battles with militants. Afghan and Russian officials have been warning that as

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It is against the Uyghurs who have gone, or are considering going, to Afghanistan that Xi Jinping wants a wall of iron.

China is well able to watch its small border with Afghanistan, which in any case is located in inhospitable country high in the mountains. However, Beijing has shown concern about Tajikistan's long border with Afghanistan. Tajikistan's eastern Gorno-Badakhshan region covers roughly the same area as Latvia. It is high

in the mountains, has a population of just over two hundred thousand, and is where Tajikistan's 480-kilometer border with China is located. China has been helping provide Tajikistan's border guards with uniforms, surveillance equipment, and building material for barracks for two decades. For most of the last decade, China has also been conducting cross-border counter-narcotics operations with Tajik forces from Gorno-Badakhshan into areas of Afghanistan, sometimes more than one hundred kilometers away from the Chinese border.

The SCO could be a vehicle for China to boost security cooperation with Tajikistan, and with Afghanistan, which has observer status in the SCO, but Russia signaled more than a decade ago that it regards the CSTO as sufficient to protect security in Central Asia. So, China moved around the SCO. In 2016, China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan formed an alliance to fight terrorism. As Reuters noted at the time, the announcement of the agreement came shortly after China's defense minister had thanked Afghan government forces for their efforts fighting militants from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a Uyghur group seeking to free the Xinjiang area from Beijing's rule.

China has funded construction of a base for Afghan troops in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, just south of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region. Chinese troops which Beijing said were members of China's People's Armed Police have been seen in the area where the Afghan base is being built. Earlier this year, there were reports about China building a military base for Chinese forces inside Tajikistan and less than twenty kilometers from the border with Afghanistan. Tajik authorities have not commented on the issue.

China has also increasingly become an arms supplier to Central Asian countries, and Turkmenistan in particular, while also supplying military uniforms and construction materials to all the Central Asian states since the late 1990s. Despite the presence of Chinese troops in far eastern Tajikistan, there is little indication presently that China would or could play a bigger role

in security in Central Asia. In July 2018, Russia staged a large military exercise in Tajikistan which included advanced warplanes, missile systems, and drones in what many saw as a message to China about who was in charge of Central Asian security.

Moves Toward Peace

Officials from India have also been meeting with Central Asian officials to offer help with security concerns, and have even raised the possibility of stationing troops at Tajikistan's Ayni military air base, which New Delhi helped renovate. The United States and NATO have also stated that they would continue to help the Central Asian states after foreign forces complete the drawdown from Afghanistan. The United States has already provided surveillance systems for the countries that border Afghanistan, as well as quad bikes for Tajik border guards, mine-resistant vehicles for Uzbek border guards, and military trucks to Kyrgyzstan.

Ideally, a peace deal will be reached in Afghanistan in which the Central Asian states stand to benefit greatly. The continued fighting in Afghanistan has held up scores of projects that would better connect Central Asia to world markets. The TAPI pipeline is one example, but there is also the Central Asia–South Asia power transmission line, CASA-1000, that aims to export electricity from hydropower plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, earning Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan sorely-needed revenue and providing Afghanistan and Pakistan with a welcome new source of energy. There are several proposed railway lines that would connect Central Asia to the subcontinent and warm water ports there. There would therefore be less need for, and spending on, security along the Afghan border.

Therefore, the Central Asian governments are acting to promote peace in Afghanistan. In March 2018, Tashkent hosted an international conference to this end, which was attended by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, and also by the foreign ministers of China, Russia, and Turkey, as well as European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini. Uzbekistan hosted an international conference called “Central Asia: One Past and a Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity” in Samarkand in November 2017 that included a special focus on Afghanistan. The Uzbek government has also offered to host Afghan peace talks and called on the Taliban to send representatives, as has the Turkmen government, several times. Russia has supported these efforts by the Central Asian states, even while it pursued its own attempts to bring warring Afghan factions to the peace table.

A History of Peace and Security Concerns

What the Central Asian governments are doing now does not differ much

from their approach twenty-five years ago, but today the stakes are higher. The Afghan civil war in the early 1990s was a concern for the Central Asian governments. There were incidents, such as the one in April 1992, when some two hundred Afghan Turkmen armed with automatic weapons crossed into Turkmenistan and set up a camp five kilometers from the border. In October 1993, Turkmenistan's government complained that Afghan warplanes dropped bombs near the Turkmen town of Tagtabazar. Refugees occasionally crossed from Afghanistan, but were sent back when fighting subsided. With the exception of the civil war in Tajikistan, spillover from Afghanistan remained close to the border.

The rapid advance of the Taliban was far more alarming to the Central Asian governments, however, who feared that the Taliban's radical ideology might take root in their own countries. Turkmenistan made it clear it was staying neutral, though here it is worth mentioning that Russian border guards also helped keep watch on Turkmenistan's Afghan frontier until 1999. The other Central Asian governments were irritated by Turkmenistan's refusal to join their condemnations of Taliban actions in Afghanistan and unite to present a common front against the threat to security that was so quickly approaching their borders.

The Taliban captured Kabul toward the end of September 1996. In early October, the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, met in Almaty, Kazakhstan to weigh their options. Uzbek President Karimov urged support for Abdul Rashid Dostum, the ethnic Uzbek commander of forces in northern Afghanistan who had become a general in Afghanistan's military during the Soviet occupation, but Kyrgyzstan's president at that time, Askar Akayev, warned against repeating the Soviet experience by interfering directly in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The nations chose to confine themselves to conducting combined military drills in Central Asia in areas close to the Afghan border as a demonstration of power.

All the same, Karimov gave support to Dostum, who controlled Mazar-i-Sharif, the gateway to Uzbekistan's border. The Taliban several times accused Uzbekistan of sending its warplanes over Afghan territory to support Dostum's forces—charges Tashkent always denied. There were also unconfirmed reports that Ahmad Shah Massoud (the defense chief of the beleaguered government of then-president of Afghanistan Burhanuddin Rabbani) was keeping four of his warplanes at a base in southern Tajikistan. In July 1998, Taliban leader Mullah Omar warned Tajik and Uzbek authorities against becoming involved in Afghan affairs.

When the Taliban finally reached the Uzbek border after chasing General Dostum from Mazar-i-Sharif at the start of August 1998, and the Tajik border

shortly afterwards, there was little chance Dushanbe and Tashkent could reach any accord with these unwanted new neighbors. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan strengthened their border defenses with help from Russia. Taliban complaints about Uzbekistan and Tajikistan's interference in Afghan affairs continued. Ashgabat, viewing Afghanistan primarily as a transit country for Turkmen exports, had ties with both the Rabanni government, which Turkmenistan officially continued to recognize, and the Taliban, which as mentioned, was allowed to open a representative office in the Turkmen capital. A Taliban delegation visited Ashgabat in May 1999 to sign agreements that included commercial flights and supplies of gas to Afghanistan with the TAPI pipeline project in mind.

The Taliban never themselves seemed to present a threat to Central Asia. They were occupied with the fighting still going on inside Afghanistan. However, among their guests were a group called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group with origins in Tajikistan's civil war that also controlled some of the lucrative drug routes from northeastern Afghanistan into Central Asia. The IMU first appeared in southern Kyrgyzstan in August 1999. They seized some mountain villages and captured four unfortunate Japanese geologists working in the area, along with several Kyrgyz military officials later sent as negotiators. It was evident that the IMU had come from the mountains of neighboring Tajikistan, where the UTO allies they fought alongside during the 1992–1997 civil war were honoring the last stage of a disarmament deal. The IMU released a statement saying their goal was the overthrow of Uzbekistan's government, and calling on Kyrgyzstan to allow them clear passage to Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's government urged Kyrgyzstan to fight, and Uzbek warplanes bombed areas in Kyrgyzstan with the Kyrgyz government's permission, and areas in Tajikistan without the Tajik government's permission.

Eventually, after Kyrgyzstan's government paid a ransom for the hostages, the IMU withdrew and Tajik border guards ferried them in helicopters into Afghanistan. The IMU returned to southern Kyrgyzstan the next summer, and this time they also came out of Tajikistan's mountains into southeastern Uzbekistan before they were repelled again. As the summer of 2001 began, there were signs that the militants were making their way back into southern Kyrgyzstan, but the expected third summer of attacks never materialized. The Taliban had asked their IMU guests to join in operations to capture the remaining areas of Afghanistan where groups such as Ahmad Shah Masoud's forces were still holding out. IMU forces were in Afghanistan's Takhar and Kunduz in November 2001 when U.S. warplanes bombed, decimating the group and scattering the remnants, who fled to Pakistan's tribal areas.

Today, A Complex Web

Not much has changed since the 1990s. The Turkmen government is dealing

with the Ghani government, but many Afghan districts in the area by the border with Turkmenistan, as local Afghan officials concede, are under Taliban control and these areas continue to receive electricity from Turkmenistan. Since the border incidents in February and May 2014, there have been reports of other casualties among Turkmen forces along the Afghan border, such as reports in Russian media that twenty-five soldiers were killed in the Serhetabat area in late June 2018. Turkmenistan denied that there had been any incidents.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's governments support the Ghani government, but there have been reports since 2014 that Tashkent and Dushanbe also are connected to activities in Afghanistan that are not coordinated with Kabul. There were reports in the last years before the Uzbek president's death in late summer of 2016 that Uzbek security forces were crossing the border to apprehend suspects, some of whom were Afghan nationals. Since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in Uzbekistan, there have not been any further reports about this.

Afghan officials have accused Tajikistan of helping the Taliban. In August 2018, Afghan Member of Parliament Kamol Sapai claimed the Taliban had connections "on the other side of the Amu-Darya" and that wounded Taliban fighters were receiving medical treatment in Tajikistan. In January 2017, the Tajik government denied Kabul's allegations that equipment belonging to the Taliban was being repaired in Tajikistan.

U.S. military officials and Afghan government and military officials have claimed Russia is funneling weapons to the Taliban through Tajikistan, accusations both Moscow and Dushanbe deny. In March 2018, then-head of U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan General John Nicholson echoed this assertion.

In December 2015, Russia's ambassador to Afghanistan at the time, Zamir Kabulov, confirmed that senior Russian military officials had met several times with a Taliban commander from the Darqaq district of Badakhshan Province, Qari Din Muhammad Hanif, during the summer of 2015. The meetings took place at a Russian base in Tajikistan, apparently without the knowledge of the Tajik government. Afghan military officials in Badakhshan pointed to the ample supplies of arms to which Hanif's forces seemed to have access as proof that Russia was supplying the Taliban commander.

The Effects of Afghanistan

Currently, the Central Asian governments, Moscow, and Beijing all regard militants from the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) as the primary concern in Afghanistan. ISK is mainly active in eastern Afghanistan, but at least one group, led by a mutinous Taliban commander in the Darzab district of Jowzjan Province, which borders Turkmenistan, declared itself to be part of

ISK. Government forces and the Taliban attacked the group, killing its leader, ethnic Uzbek Qari Hikmatullah, in April 2018. According to many reports and statements from governments in Central Asia, Russia, and China, the ISIS wing in Afghanistan includes in its ranks citizens from all of the Central Asian countries and Uyghurs from China, and more continue to come to Afghanistan from Iraq and Syria as ISIS territory is retaken there. IMU fighters attacked the Jinnah airport in Karachi in June 2014, and a subsequent Pakistani military offensive in the tribal areas pushed the IMU back into Afghanistan. In August 2015, IMU leader Usman Ghazi announced the group had taken the oath of allegiance to ISIS. Not all IMU militants accepted this but of those that did, some were sent to the Middle East, and others to Zabol and Faryab provinces in Afghanistan, where they and other fighters were nearly wiped out as they fled to join up with other ISK groups. The presence of ISK is given as a possible explanation for why Russia, or other outside parties, would help the Taliban. Taliban troops have been waging the fiercest campaigns against ISK.

Foreign forces can withdraw from Afghanistan, but the Central Asian states cannot move their borders. What happens in Afghanistan has always had an effect on how leaders in Ashgabat, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Nur-Sultan, and Tashkent could govern their countries. Presently an uncertain future awaits the region, and because the outbreak of problems in Central Asia could affect areas farther away, there are outside governments that are ready to offer, or force, their help to keep Afghanistan's problems inside Afghanistan. ©